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## SUPERSTITION IN ENGLISH LIFE.

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IN reviewing the progress of a nation, we are at once confronted with a complex series of questions respecting the separate influences that have united to mold those characteristics that stamp its individuality when compared with other countries. Each of these, if discussed with that impartial spirit of inquiry so necessary for eliciting truth in all matters of research, will supply the links in the chain of causes that have made the nation what it is. The subject is important, because by a process of analysis it traces the growth and development, and sometimes the decline, of those controlling principles that have been favorable, or otherwise, to the interests of certain features in the moral life of a people. Such a method of procedure has an intrinsic value, because it discriminates and accounts for those phases of character and motives of conduct that are ever distinguishing one country from another in the course of its history. In separating, then, the various elements that compose a nation's life, we must strive as far as possible to estimate each at its proper worth, although prejudice is sometimes apt to warp our judgment. Thus persons, whether regarded individually or collectively, hesitate before giving prominence to faults in their character; and hence it has been generally acknowledged that civilized countries have underestimated the prevalence of contemporary short-comings in their national life. This is, perhaps, specially true with regard to superstition, which, in spite of the enormous power it has exerted over most countries in bygone times, has rarely in its successive stages met at the time with due recognition. But this may be partly explained by the circumstance that the very same doctrine that has been condemned by a nation as superstition at one period of its intellectual development, was accepted in the very reverse light during the age in which it flourished. What better

illustration can be adduced that this is the case, than the great witchcraft movement, which in England reached its climax during the Commonwealth? That such a system should at any time have succeeded in not only forcing its monstrous impositions upon sensible men, but in exercising a species of terrorism upon susceptible and timid minds, is a dark stain in the pages of English history. No apologists, however forcible their defense, will ever be able to wipe away this blot; for, whilst bearing testimony to the prodigious degree to which superstition had reached, it proves how, when once the moral balance of a nation is out of gear, it may, by taking distorted views of things, condescend to acts of cruelty, as actually happened in the terrible persecutions with which the supposed practitioners of witchcraft were punished. The decline and ultimate decay of this movement, therefore, marked an eventful epoch in the history of England, because, with the exposure of its absurd pretensions, a reaction followed, accompanied by an outburst of incredulity that gave a blow to superstition from which it has never recovered. The time had at last arrived when the religious terrorism that witchcraft had produced exhausted the limits of intellectual patience, and produced a spirit of disgust, which turned into ridicule and contempt a system that had, as Mr. Lecky remarks in his "*History of Rationalism in Europe*" (Vol. I., p. 126), been regarded as "a phase of the miraculous and the work of the devil." A still more remarkable instance of this revulsion of public feeling may be found in the writings of one of the most eminent men of his time, Sir Thomas Browne. In or about 1633, when the throne, says Mr. Buckle ("*History of Civilization in England*," Vol. I., p. 365), "was still occupied by a superstitious prince, and when men were incessantly persecuted for their religious opinions," this author wrote his "*Religio Medici*," a work in which he made no attempt to deny the popular errors of the day; nay, instead of using his masterly ability to disprove such follies, he openly announced his belief in the philosopher's stone and in palmistry, and affirmed the reality of witches, saying that those who "deny their existence are not merely infidels, but atheists." But twelve years later, when he wrote his celebrated work, "*Inquiries into Common and Vulgar Errors*," it is evident that he was influenced by the pressure of the age; "for this production, it must be remembered," adds Mr. Buckle, "is remarkable as being the first

systematic onslaught ever made in England upon those superstitious fancies which were then prevalent respecting the external world." It is unnecessary to go into further details on this point, for enough has been said to show what a powerful factor in the regulation of human affairs is superstition, and more especially when it happens to impregnate the religious beliefs of the time.

Admitting, therefore, that superstition must be acknowledged as one of the constituent parts that enter into the composition of a nation's character, it is a subject for inquiry as to the sources from which the folk-lore of a people is derived, and how far in the course of years it may have been either encouraged or not by those operative principles which find a more congenial soil in some countries than in others. Confining the subject, then, to England, it may fairly be asked, firstly, how came those rich stores of romances and legends, coupled as they have been from time immemorial with a most varied assortment of superstitious beliefs and usages, into its midst; and, secondly, how far have these exercised an influence at the respective periods in which they have flourished?

In answer to the first of these propositions, there can be no doubt that, in the case of the English people, the superstitious element must be partly traced to their heterogeneous composition. Thus, to quote Mr. Elton's words in his "*Origins of English History*" (1882, p. 2), "The English nation is compounded of the blood of many different races; and we might claim a personal interest not only in the Gaelic and Belgic tribes who struggled with the Roman legions, but even in the first cave-men, who sought their prey by the slowly receding ice fields, and the many forgotten peoples whose memory is barely preserved in the names of mountains and rivers." Hence, it does not require any great amount of ingenuity to ascertain the antecedent history of many of those superstitions, survivals of which linger on in most English villages. It is true that in their present forms they are often very much changed, and indeed in certain cases they have almost lost their identity; but yet they generally possess some feature or other which, in an unmistakable manner, betrays their original source. These indications would probably oftentimes escape detection by the general observer, but not so with the careful student of folk-lore, who, by applying the comparative method, easily finds out when pursuing

his inquiries what characteristics any particular superstition has in common with a similar one found in another country ; though occasionally these are microscopically small. As an illustration, pin-wells may be noticed, which prevail so extensively in Wales and Scotland. Such localities are specially visited by country girls, who, after making their customary offerings, practice sundry divinations for the purpose of gaining an insight into the secrets of futurity. Not uncommonly in the neighborhood of these "wishing-wells" there is a rag-bush on which bits of linen or worsted are tied as a gift to the presiding spirit of the well. At first sight, such a practice as that of presenting an offering to a wayside well may seem fanciful and meaningless ; but a little inquiry shows that what the village maiden does from purely superstitious motives is, in reality, a modification of an ancient ceremony that partook of the nature of a religious rite. Thus we read of money glittering in the clear pool of Clitumnus, and Gregory of Tours has bequeathed us a picture of the simple-minded villagers feasting by a Gaulish lake, and throwing to the water-gods "scraps of cloth and linen and locks of wool, together with little cakes of wax and figures of loaves and cheeses."\* Again, Grimm, in his "Teutonic Mythology," following the same line of research, has collected and grouped together a vast assemblage of superstitions, and through his labors we are enabled to trace many of those survivals of primitive belief that exist to this day, as witnesses of the evolution of culture from those low forms of thought and conception that are predominant in rude and uncivilized communities. Indeed, it may be truly argued that just as flint knives or stone monuments point to a time "when Europeans resembled races where such things are still part of actual life, so do the traces in our organism of fetichism and totemism connect our past with people where such forms of thought are still predominant."† What stronger or more convincing proof of the community of origin of certain beliefs preserved in England can be urged than the observances connected with the popular festivals of the calendar? Thus Christmas is undoubtedly no other than the old Yule festival. The Yule-log not so many years ago crackled merrily on most hearths, testifying to the rites of fire-worship formerly celebrated at this season. Similarly, the bonfires that once

\* See Elton's "Origins of English History," p. 285.

† J. A. Farrer, "Primitive Manners and Customs," 1879, p. 314.

blazed on the hill-tops on Midsummer Eve also had their symbolic appropriateness; for the summer solstice was originally the great season of fire-festivals throughout Europe, when, amongst other rites, blazing fire-wheels were rolled down from the hills into the valleys as a sign of the sun's descending course.\* It is evident, therefore, that both Christmas and Midsummer have not merely had solar rites transferred to them, but are themselves of solar origin. It must not be forgotten, also, that, with reference to Easter, we keep this festival at the time when our pagan forefathers were in the habit of sacrificing to the Goddess Eostre; and it has been suggested by Mr. Farrer that even our English hot cross-buns may be the descendants of cakes once eaten in her honor, on which the mark of Christianity has taken the place of some heathen sign. Indeed, it has long been admitted that a great proportion of the superstitious usages that for centuries were observed throughout England, and many of which still linger on in remote districts, have an origin far older than Christianity itself. Introduced into the country from various sources and by different races, these pagan customs were often skillfully ingrafted into our Christian ceremonies, under which metamorphosis they have ever since survived. Such a system answered a twofold purpose; for, in consolidating a country like England, it was necessary as far as possible to blend the heterogeneous elements into one harmonious whole. In giving a Christian color, also, to heathen practices, any ill-feeling that might otherwise have arisen was thereby avoided; and so by means of this compromise Christianity in England gained not only additional followers, but an amount of sympathetic support of which it stood in need.

I might, without much difficulty, bring forward innumerable illustrations, if it were necessary, in confirmation of this fact, for they lie thickly scattered through English history. In truth, there is hardly an English village of any size that cannot boast of some item of superstition, or traditionary lore, which can be explained on this principle. Thus, according to a Suffolk belief, the elder is a mystic tree, and therefore must never be burned, as misfortune will inevitably overtake the person that is guilty of this sacrilegious act. Few of the peasantry can assign the true reason of this superstitious reverence with which the tree is invested, but it doubtless originated from its association with

\* See Tylor's "*Primitive Culture*," 1873, II., p. 298.

Huldah, the Good Mother of Northern Mythology, whose offspring are the Elves. When we remember, too, that as recently as the fifteenth century rites were performed in her honor in the Venusberg, near Eisenach, it is not surprising that the tree bound up with her history should have been honored with such an extensive folk-lore. Again, to take one of the most popular superstitions, why does the English peasant nowadays regard with as much mistrust the sight of the raven, as when Shakspeare made Lady Macbeth, in the fullness of her murderous impulse, exclaim,

“The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements”?

We know, too, what powerful use Edgar Allan Poe has made of this “grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore,” in his poem of “The Raven.” This aversion is certainly attributable to the traditionary character of the bird, which has been transmitted from our distant ancestors, a superstition that has prevailed over the greatest part of Europe. Again, in addition to the heterogeneous composition of the English people as affording one of the explanations of the complex nature of their superstitions, may be mentioned the influences of physical causes. Thus, as Mr. Buckle has pointed out, “whatever inspires feelings of terror, or of great wonder, and whatever excites in the mind an idea of the vague and uncontrollable, has a special tendency to inflame the imagination.” By way of illustration, it may be noted that, of physical events, earthquakes are the most striking, and hence their effect has been to encourage superstition. On the same principle, the scenery of a country has a similar tendency; the grandeur of the mountain, in contrast with a flat or undulating stretch of land, inspiring feelings of awe productive of superstitious fear. This, it has often been urged, is especially true in respect of Scotland and many parts of Ireland; and therefore accounts in a great measure for the rapid advancement of superstition amongst their inhabitants. Thus, as Burton remarks in his “Criminal Trials in Scotland” (I., pp. 240–243), “Superstitions, like funguses and vermin, are existences peculiar to the spot where they appear, and are governed by its physical accidents. . . . And thus it is that the indications of witchcraft in Scotland are as different from those of the superstition which in England receives the same name, as

the Grampian Mountain from Shooter's Hill or Kennington Common." Hence, too, the superstitions of the Cornish people, a country which until a recent period maintained a somewhat singular isolation. "England," says Mr. Hunt in his "Popular Romances of the West of England," "with many persons appeared to terminate on the shores of the river Tamar, and the wreckers of the coasts, and the miners of the hills, were equally regarded as indicating the semi-civilization of this country." This seclusion of the Cornish people, added to the wild features of many parts of their sea-girt coasts, explains the preservation of their primitive character, coupled with that legendary lore and superstition which still has such a firm hold amongst these simple-minded folk. Another important source of superstition is ignorance, whereby men unacquainted with natural causes assign to supernatural agencies what may be explained by physical laws. How largely this was the case in England, in bygone centuries, may be gathered from the literature of the period, in which frequent allusion is made to the vulgar errors of our forefathers. Although, happily, under the influence of education, many of the dark superstitions of the past have succumbed to the enlightening power of knowledge, yet they are still largely represented amongst the agricultural population of England. Thus, scarcely a week passes without some case being brought before a provincial magistrate, in which the complainant seeks requital for supposed injuries sustained through his having been "overlooked by the baneful influence of the evil-eye." Formerly, many a harmless individual was either subjected to ill-treatment or underwent punishment for exercising this imaginary power. Fortune-telling is extensively practiced by the English peasantry, and various kinds of divination; one of the most popular being that known as the "Bible and the key." Mr. Buckle has shown that the superstition of a nation must always bear an exact proportion to the extent of its physical knowledge, and adds that, "if we compare the different classes of society, we shall find that they are superstitious in proportion as the phenomena with which they are brought in contact have or have not been explained by natural laws. The credulity of sailors is notorious, and every literature contains evidence of the multiplicity of their superstitions, and of the tenacity with which they cling to them." That this is so, is shown by daily observation; for, in those districts



where railways and school-boards have been introduced, superstition has perceptibly declined. I have quoted some of the principal sources of superstition as existing in England, and if space permitted, I might have enlarged on this branch of the subject. At any rate, I have given a general survey of the causes that have produced this element in the national character; and it remains to consider how far superstition has exercised an influence in the nation's life.

Referring, then, to English history, it must be acknowledged, by any impartial observer, that superstition, in one form or another, has not only prevailed very largely in all sections of society, but has frequently made its influence felt in political events. Thus, the signs that foreshadow the death or fall of kings are graphically described by Shakspeare in "*King Richard II.*," and terrestrial portents, it may be remembered, accompanied the birth of Owen Glendower and Richard III. Indeed, speaking of Shakspeare, Mr. Goadby rightly remarks that in his day the current superstitions were a common possession, and he could no more have escaped from their influence than from the atmosphere he breathed. A world of supernaturalism affected alike the pulpit and the stage, the students of science, and the gossips of the village green. Queen Elizabeth was a firm believer in astrology, and even the date of her coronation was fixed by Dr. Dee, the celebrated astrologer, as the result of a stellar consultation, made at the request of Dudley. In short, superstition entered so thoroughly into the daily life of this period, that it would seem as if our forefathers were ready to invest the smallest event, out of the ordinary course of common experience, with the supernatural. Can we wonder that the most exorbitant cases of superstition were of constant occurrence amongst the middle and lower orders, when they heard of the sovereign's consulting a soothsayer for her trivial ailments, and the nobility of the land lending their coöperation and giving their sanction to the most preposterous forms of mysticism? Nor was this all; for the representatives of science, to whom the people naturally looked for guidance, were not exempt from the popular fallacies of their time. Thus we find no less a person than Lord Bacon, in his "*Natural History*," a book that was looked up to with the utmost faith by reason of his high reputation, laying it down as credible that precious stones "may work by consent upon the spirits of men to comfort and exhilarate them. Those that are

best for that effect are the diamond, the emerald, the hyacinth, and the yellow topaz." And then, again, the clergy, whose teaching was valued and respected on account of their sacred calling, were equally untrustworthy expounders of the superstitions of the time. Bishop Jewell, for instance, when preaching before Queen Elizabeth, made some pointed observations on the sorcery and witchcraft notions that had begun to gain such a wide field of popularity. "Your Grace's subjects," he said, "pine away, even unto the death; their color fadeth, their flesh rotteth, their speech is benumbed, their senses are bereft. I pray God they never practice further than upon the subject." It would seem, therefore, that the influence that superstition had gained on all classes in the sixteenth century, and, as I could also show, in the seventeenth, was almost unlimited; and this explains the rapid development of the great witchcraft movement in England, the extravagant and monstrous pretensions of which I have already spoken.

But, during the present century, the rapid advancement of physical science has been powerfully instrumental in dissipating many of those superstitions that, in the preceding centuries, had gained such a firm hold on popular credulity. Thus it exposed the fallacy of attributing to the interference of an angry God the calamities with which the world is occasionally visited, instead of explaining them on natural causes. Hence, happily, events that in years gone by were placed in the category of supernatural inflictions, are now known to be the inevitable result of certain well-known laws. At the same time, it was neither unreasonable nor contrary to what one might have expected, that, when science, some years ago, made a resolute onset against the long-established and deeply rooted convictions of the English people, it should be violently assailed as promulgating views and starting theories entirely at variance with what were regarded as so many familiar truths, the accuracy of which had never been seriously doubted. Consequently, on the one hand, science had to combat with the spirit of the age, which was satisfied to give a tacit, unquestioning assent to the traditional belief that had been handed down from father to son with an almost sacred reverence. Indeed, it was often argued, on a foolish and illogical principle, that the solutions of abstruse questions that had been decided by the leading intellects

of former generations should be upheld and respected, especially as it was urged that they not unfrequently dealt with matters concerning which human knowledge must always be limited. It was, therefore, no easy task to weaken men's faith in many of those popular theories that had received the sanction of public opinion, and on this account retained, as it were, an authoritative influence over an acquiescing people. But the steady progress of the development of physical science was not in any way disheartened or checked by the opposition it had to encounter in its struggle to expose the errors of superstition — a difficulty, indeed, from which it is not wholly free, even at the present day. A survival, for example, of an old piece of weather-wisdom, which is received with implicit faith by the educated portion of the community, is the familiar theory that the weather changes with the moon's quarterings. Although meteorologists have long ago repudiated this maxim as contrary to natural laws, yet, as an article of astrological belief, it retains its influence amongst all classes of society. "That educated people," remarks Mr. Tylor ("Primitive Culture," 1873, I., 130), "to whom exact weather records are accessible, should still find satisfaction in the fanciful lunar rule, is an interesting case of intellectual survival." An instance of this kind is instructive, because it demonstrates, in a forcible manner, how tenaciously men cling to the influence of superstitious precepts, even when the ignorance that gave birth to them is superseded by a corresponding growth of knowledge. Granted, then, the difficulty of effacing existing survivals of superstitious belief, it is no matter of surprise that, two or three centuries ago, when education was at a low ebb, public feeling was ready to grasp any notion, however fanciful. As in the case of the witchcraft movement, an amount of faith was required of those who accepted its articles of belief, which is certainly not asked of the members of any religious community. Doubtless, therefore, as years roll on, and knowledge continues to increase, the tendency will be to abandon and despise superstition as a relic of an antiquated and less enlightened period. Moreover, as science in its progress throws, from time to time, new insight into the laws that regulate the universe, the feeling for the supernatural that formerly enthralled men's minds with a despotic fear will give place to the light of truth. Such a result must have an en-

nobling effect on a nation's character; because, as the intellect becomes gradually more disentangled from the trammels of superstition, it will view with a calm and fearless gaze the phenomena of the world around, which were oftentimes regarded as so many stupendous mysteries, not unfrequently supposed to be antagonistic to and at variance with the well-being of humanity.

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